A PLAN FOR
SCHOOL-PUBLIC RELATIONS
FOR NORTH SCOTT

A Tentative Plan

by

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School-Public Relations
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Summary

Introduction

Although its study is relatively new, public relations has always been a part of the public school. Its significance is that public relations is not something that personnel of the school can take or leave, as they so desire. The various publics in any public school district have opinions about the many activities and actions of the local school. These attitudes are being shaped by what these people hear and over-hear about the public school.

Consequently, every school district does have a public relations program and policy. It may not recognize the need for an organized program or a written policy but some type of program is in operation none-the-less. For better or for worse, the school does cast an image --- and rightly so. As Abraham Lincoln pointed out in defining democracy, so it is with our democratic schools. They are designed of, by, and for the people.[1]

Recognizing this basic promise, the central question should be --- How effective is this school's public relations program? In examining the effectiveness of the school's public relations program via the 'armchair method' questions come to mind such as: Is there good two-way communication between the school and the community? Do parents possess favorable attitudes toward the school? What is the teacher-image in the community? Is school spirit apparent in the student body? How would this school measure up to surrounding schools if an opinion poll were to be taken by a Davenport paper?

1 For a thorough explanation see, Leslie W. Kindred, School Public Relations: A Specific Course of Action (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1957) pp. 4-8 and pp. 19-20

We can guess at the answers to these questions but we probably can agree that regardless what the present state of our public relations program it can be improved through organized, planned effort. There are three central objectives to an effective public relations program. They are: to bring about understanding of, to create sympathy for, and to secure participation in the cause of public education.[2] Each will be clarified briefly.

The public should have a clear understanding of the true nature of the school's activities, both curricular and extra-curricular. This does not imply "sugar coating" or "selling wares" but it does require a constant and continuous information service as to what is going on in the classroom, why we teach as we do, what we are teaching, and how the students are benefiting from the public school. If we are providing a service, the people of the community have a right to know of what that service consists. As in business we should hold to the view that, "the best advertising is a satisfied customer."

To create sympathy for the cause of public education does not mean a "bleeding heart" approach of offering condolences. It does mean a conscious attempton the part of public school personnel to create favorable attitudes toward the school. For example, why does school millage increase faster than the cost of living? It should be obvious that a good system of education does cost more than a poor system (as was the case too frequently in the past). Additional services which are needed do mean an increase in the millage. It

[2] Original credit for the three basic ideas should be given to, Dr. James Harold Fox, George Washington University, Dean of School of Education.

costs money to retain good teachers and there is merit in retaining good teachers. Quality always costs more. But how effectively do members of the staff answer the above question raised by so many taxpayers? What kinds of answers would be offered by that segment of the general public favorable to the cause of good education? There are good, honest, straightforward answers to this question. We must try our best to cultivate interest and attachment on the part of every possible member of the community to be in favor of a quality education for each pupil in our school.

To secure participation in the cause of public education can be misinterpreted very easily if it is not clarified. It does not mean tampering with decisions of the school board or competing with school administrators. It does mean having as many individuals as possible, psychologically ready, to participate in citizen affairs of the school. It is reflected in any community by an active PTA, Teacher Association, Student Council, and the various community groups. It is just as evident by such occurrences as the invitation of a teacher for dinner, a good word for some staff member, or the volunteering of a group to campaign for a coming bond issue.

The best possible program of education can be achieved only if the school as an entirety enjoys good relations with the public. It means that each member of the school board, member of the professional staff, and student be as informed as possible and be willing to do his share in conveying information to and from the public.

A Written Policy on Public Relations

For purposes of common understanding, it is advisable to have a written policy on school-public relations.[3] This is a decision of the board of education who customarily has the written policy established and delegates to the superintendent such powers and duties as are necessary to achieve the maximum benefit for the school district. Whether any funds are to be provided and appraisal devices to be used are other important decisions to reach. A sample outline is provided below.

(A sample outline for)
A Policy of School-Public Relations
for North Scott

(Introduction)

The Board of Education recognizes the need for its actions and policies to be public information. The Board seeks cooperation, study, and participation from all individuals and groups concerned with a good program of education for the children of North Scott Community School District. In recognizing the public nature of the school, the Board is in no way abdicating its responsibility to the citizens of this community as the official governing body responsible for final decisions on all matters of policy and educational programs.

(Basic Decisions)

Establishing a policy regarding school board meetings.

[3] Kindred, op. cit., pp. 73-76 for a thorough explanation of reasons for a written policy.

Establishing a policy regarding school board meetings (cont.)

1. Are the press, the public, and school employees welcome during regular board meetings? Or, in other words, how open do you desire regular meetings to be?

2. What portion of the meetings are a matter of public record?

3. Where are the minutes recorded if information is desired by an interested member of the community?

Board policy on information

1. Are all areas of organization to be managed by the Superintendent?

2. Or do you wish to identify all concerned and direct them to cooperate? (Such as below)

The Superintendent shall be responsible for translating this policy into action by setting up the proper organization, motivating the staff, providing in-service training for the staff, examining policies and practices of the school, and collecting data by which the effectiveness of the program can be judged by the Board.

The principal, assistant principal, and director of elementary education shall assist the Superintendent by enlisting the support of all teachers and non-instructional staff members in promoting good public relations.

Each teacher shall attempt to further the cause of education by cooperating with other teachers and administrators in providing information necessary for better public understanding of the role of the school. Each teacher should regard himself as an ambassador of the school to the students and to the community.

Each non-instructional member of the school should recognize that as an employee of the school district he has a responsibility to maintain and improve the immage of the school.

Each student should be made aware that he is a vital part of the school and responsible for conveying correct information to and from the home. Members of the Student-Council, class officers, participants in school activities, and spectators in school-sponsored activities should realize the important contributions they can make as special representatives of the school.

Organizing and Administering the Plan

The first logical step to take is to establish the necessary machinery for obtaining information from the various publics. This involves identification of parents, other citizens, and organized groups in the community. Information about these publics may be obtained by means of the community survey, opinion polls, and other methods --- such as the personal interview. School board members and administrators can operate in very small communities without these tools but it is questionable whether any sizable school district can fuction well without more than face-to-face contacts with the citizens of the community.[4] Provisions for obtaining information from the community can be handled satisfactorily, either through classroom activities (such as a project of the American Problems Class) or through the central office.

Next, machinery should be put into operation to provide information to citizens of the school district. This involves locating and defining problems and unmet needs which can be met by an effective public relations program. Teachers, as well as administrators, should be used in this phase even though it calls for final decisions from the central office. After this is accomplished, a set of objectives should be formulated, as guidelines, as well as goals. The ultimate objective, of course, should be quality education for the children in our American democracy. Many times other goals may be needed to "bridge the gap" between the problem and the ultimate

[4] Ibid. Chs. 3-4, especially pp. 39-40.

goal, however.

Selecting the means for reaching the goals is the next step. Here the accent, "should be on what the school can do, not what it is going to say to the public."[5] It should be recognized that some parts of the specific plan of action may take several years to be effectively utilized.

Last, the formal writing out of the program plan should be accomplished in as simple and meaningful a form as possible. Charts and diagrams help in this regard. Copies should be circulated to staff members for comments before the plan is presented for adoption.

Regardless of the acceptability of particular aspects of the above proposal, there are many possibilities for improvement in our present school program of school-public relations. This is not meant in a critical sense, but planning usually can make a good program better. Comments for possible improvement will be offered as suggestions by the writer. They are the result of textbook and other readings, "social osmosis" of summer school, and independent thinking on the part of the writer.

Ten Suggestions For the Coming School Year

1. Why not have a Public Relations Calendar?

> Many school activities which are now covered can be covered better if anticipated in advance. It allows one to seek out stories of interest regarding such activities at the beginning of school and vacation news about students and teachers. Finally, it would provide an opportunity to cover information about the curriculum in an organized way.[6]

5 ibid. p. 397

6 Suggested by Dr. Salisbury, class lecture on University of Iowa Campus, Wednesday, June 16, 1965

2. Why not invite parents and other citizens to come into the school?

This would be a limited but quite personal approach to letting the community know what is happening in the school during the usual school day. It should involve no more than 25 or 30 parents at a time and should imvolve coffee and conversation before classroom visitation. A personal invitation by the principal or director of elementary education would be a must to insure success.[7]

3. Why not utilize publicity for effective communication with parents?

Brochures to the parents would be very useful in our school district due to the fact that we have no newspaper in the area which can be called a community newspaper. It is now necessary to send one page information sheets home with the students from time to time. We could do more in this area, especially for orientation purposes in the elementary and junior high school. We do now send one handbook to parents on preparations necessary before entering Kindergarten.[8]

4. Why not utilize publicity for effective communication with teachers?

Two obvious advantages of a house organ are that the teacher can become more informed than the students regarding administrative decisions and the teachers can be made more aware of what other teachers are doing. In our school we have an especially difficult task of coordinating the efforts of the elementary staff and the secondary staff. Even with the new elementary schools we will experience difficulties due to physical distance factors.[9]

5. Why not "dress up" special school programs?

For example, at commencement the trophy case could be cleaned out and a display made of all the books the average senior studied to arrive at that level. Perhaps an average assortment of library books should also be included. Each regular school program should be examined for possible public relations value.[10]

7 ibid. June 17, 1965

8 ibid.

9 Kindred, op. cit. p. 412

10 Salisbury, op. cit. June 21-22 lectures

6. Why not consider the impact of consolidation of our elementary schools?

Parents are going to view these larger schools with some feelings of reservation once the actual operation begins. Contacts with teachers and the composition of the teaching staff will undergo transformations. Some of the older elementary teachers are going to react to the coming change. Can some of these problems be identified and information be made available before negative reactions begin to crystalize?[11]

7. Why not prepare the public for eventual acceptance of a separate Junior High School?

If several years hence, we are forced into building due to an increased enrollment (which is quite possible since industry has begun to locate in the school district) it would be better to present the necessary bond issue to a public which has been forewarned and is receptive to the need for a change.[12]

8. Why not prepare the public for acceptance of a new shop area for vocational agriculture?

One way to gain some acceptance would be through information to the public to the effect that the majority of our students do not go on to college upon graduation. Many of the boys will need an ever-increasing number of courses in metals and related shop courses. We do have a problem of adequate space for our metal shop and voc ag shop which at present are one in the same. Although the nature of voc ag and metals have much in common there are differences in necessary shop organization for the two areas. It will be a definite advantage for both areas if we construct a separate voc ag shop. This line of reasoning can be involved in several articles which explain the two areas, cite the problems, stress the importance of both, and explain the only feasible solution. These articles should be separate features oriented around the student and his needs. They should be written over an extended period of time appearing in The Lance in separate issues. The need should also be mentioned by the teachers involved during Open House this year.[13]

11 Due to the nature of this paper it should be noted that this is personal opinion on the part of the writer.

12 ibid.

13 ibid.

9. Why not advertise our curriculum?

Contrary to popular belief, parents are interested in the school curriculum. Less than 25% of the total coverage of topics relating to the school in newspapers pertains to the curriculum. Yet polls have shown that parents are interested in what is going on in the classroom and what school policies are concerning promotion, discipline, etc. Each teacher should be capable of at least one story per year on what is going on in his classroom. Each administrator has some items of information which would be appropriate for news release to The Lance. Because it is a student publication it is left entirely to the students to find the news. Most students, as well as parents, would be interested in anything a teacher or administrator has to say in a news article. To stimulate some response on the part of administrators the writer has included several items of correspondence to be utilized by the Superintendent if he so desires.[14]

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(Sample letter from Superintendent to)
(other administrators)

Very little of our school publicity in newspaper articles pertains to the school curriculum in the area of the classroom and the regular sequence of the normal five-day school week. The extra-curricular events have a way of taking care of themselves; the curricular events seem to get lost somewhere along the line. The result of this type of coverage is imbalance. Instructional methods, pupil progress, and the classroom today, are items of interest to parents.

In order to establish balance in school publicity it is suggested that we consider possible news articles to appear in the school paper and other papers, if appropriate. Possible topics are listed below. A simple division is included to avoid duplication of effort.

Superintendent	Principal
1. Why the present report card	1. Methods of teaching
2. Building Needs	2. The modern classroom
3. Special Education	3. Mid-term progress reports
4. General policy on discipline	4. Meet the teachers
5. Strong points of our school	5. Policy regarding homework
6. A superintendent's day	

14 Kindred, op. cit. p. 315 for imbalance of news.

Assistant Principal	Director of Elem. Education
1. Why we have a student council	1. The reading program
2. Why we have class officers	2. Math and the new math
3. The importance of assembly programs	3. Why we have Kindergarten

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(Possibility for a story)

NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED IN SCHOOL TODAY! IT WAS BUSINESS AS USUAL! Yet every day in our high school over 40 teachers working with over 900 students guide the student body in the performance of about 5,000 assignments. We served 600 noon meals today --- more than any restaurant in the Quad-cities. (And so forth)

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10. Why not organize a workshop for teachers in school-public relations?

Plans could be made during the coming year for a workshop to be held either at the close of the school year or the beginning of the next school year. It should include at least a speaker who is informed on school-public relations, a meeting by departments or areas, and a presentation of committee reports.[15]

Summary

Public relations is a by-product of the school. Good public relations is a result of a constant and continuous program of mutual communications between the school and the community. Any good program is noted by its effect. It is reflected by the school spirit of the student body. It is mirrored in the morale of the teaching staff. It is observed in the loyalty of the non-instructional staff. It is shown by the confidence in the school by members of the community. In the final analysis, it is a form of democracy in action.

15 ibid. for a more detailed coverage.

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